



THE STORY



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Speaker: Matthew Eckert
Scripture: The Story – Chapter 9

As I've been pondering The Story today, I think of this question – what do you do to remember things? What do you do? You know, on a day-to-day basis, maybe you are like me – I use Google Calendar and my schedule is in there and about ten minutes before a meeting has to start my phone rings, chirps, beeps, whatever it is. It reminds me that in ten minutes you need to be somewhere. On more than one occasion, unfortunately, I've booked a 6:30 a.m. meeting, forgot to check my calendar the day before, and at 6:20 my phone chirps and lets me know I am supposed to be across the city for a 6:30 meeting in ten minutes, and I have to figure that out. Maybe you've been in the boat that I'm in.

But what do you do to remember things? Perhaps like birthdays or anniversaries. Do you have a schedule, something to tell you? Do you maybe have a friend or family member to remind you because you don't want to make the same mistake as last year, right, when you forgot your anniversary? Been in those circumstances? Gentlemen?

But there are things we do to remember what's coming, but there are things in our lives that remind us of what took place, aren't there? Triggers, things that remind us of, perhaps, experiences in life. You know, for me, whenever I'll drive by a farm and smell manure – for me, that's good memories. Some of you may think that's strange, but I worked on farms from Grade 7. I enjoyed what I did so whenever I smell that I'm thinking that is good. Farmer's gold, they call it. Whenever I smell diesel fuel, love that! Sorry for the environmental piece here, but driving the tractor and moving around and

cultivating and bringing in fruit from the farms in Niagara Peninsula, I just loved it! As an aside, if you want a good way to keep mosquitoes off you, we used to take a stick and dip it in the diesel tank and we'd rub ourselves with diesel. Maybe not a good skin care product idea, although maybe it will take off, but I'll be okay. It worked great for mosquito repellent.

How about songs? Do they remind you of things, perhaps? Remember high school? You know, Air Supply, if you are my age. Remember that? *Matt sings: I'm lying alone with my head on the phone [come on] thinking of you 'til it hurts. I know you are, too, but what else can we do tormented and torn apart.* Ya? It's good. Whenever I hear that song to this day, it reminds me of all those girls in high school I liked who didn't like me - but that's for another conversation.

What are you doing, perhaps, to help you remember The Story, this journey we're on for thirty-one weeks? The kids are receiving these trading cards and over the time they'll get thirty-one trading cards reminding them of all the stories and I'm trusting that in a year, two years from now they can pull them out and remind themselves 'oh ya, this is God's grand story'.

We've heard some great conversations from some of you how you are engaging this. Cathy Harris who is part of our community here at North Park, she is painting her way through The Story. Here's one of her pictures. I had a chance to go through her book, her art book she's making. This is from the Ten Commandments. This is kind of what came to her.

The next slide shows a couple more of the pages that she's kind of utilizing her artistic ability for her to remind herself and, by the end of The Story, she is going to have this book that she can work her way through again and remind her what was God teaching me and bringing to my life as I took this journey. This is what she is using.

Are you embracing The Story? What are you putting in place even now so that you don't forget what's taken place? You see, in The Story, God Himself is actually putting in reminders all the way through. You may recall from Noah and the Ark and the flood and God chooses to make a rainbow. This is a reminder of His covenant, His promise 'I will never flood the earth again. Whenever you see that, don't forget'. Reminders of circumcision, of the covenant He made with Abraham for the Israelite nation, the things that Moses put together for them, the Sabbath and the Festivals and the events and the way the Tabernacle was laid out – all reminders that you will not forget who God is.

The Israelites themselves actually created some of these when they crossed the Jordan River. Joshua had them take twelve stones out of the river and put them up so that whenever anyone walked by those stones they would remember 'this is what God did for us here. These are triggers for us'.

As I pondered The Story this week in the Book of Ruth, I was reminded again there are these pictures, there's these images that remind me that as much as they were relevant thousands of years ago today, they project into my time right now and they trigger things in me.

Now instead of me telling you the story of Ruth, I thought I'd do it a little bit more creatively today. I hope you know about the website called thebibleproject.com. Look it up or you can go on YouTube and kind of put The Bible Project. There's this group that are creatively graphically putting together highlights of all the books of the Bible. It's really cool. And so instead of me, I want to play this actually seven-minute creation of the story of Ruth

so you can see that and then I want to unpack a few things. So sit back and take a look at this video right now.

[Video starts]

The Book of Ruth. It's a brilliant work of theological art and it invites us to reflect on the question of how God is involved in the day-to-day joys and hardships of our lives. There are three main characters in the Book: Naomi, the widow; Ruth, the Moabite; and, Boaz, the Israelite farmer. And their story is told in four chapters that are beautifully designed. Let's just dive in and see how this all unfolds.

Chapter One opens with this line: *In the days when the judges ruled*, and it reminds us of the very dark and difficult days from the Book of Judges. And here we meet an Israelite family in Bethlehem struggling to survive through a famine. And so, in search of food, they move on to the land of Moab, Israel's ancient enemy. And there the father of the family dies and the sons marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. And then the sons, they die, too. And so they leave only Naomi and these new daughters-in-law. And so Naomi, she has no reason to stay anymore and so she tells her new daughters-in-law that she's moving back home. And Naomi, she knows that the life of an unmarried foreign widow in Israel is going to be very hard and so she compels the women to stay behind. Orpah agrees, but Ruth does not. She shows remarkable loyalty to Naomi and she says '*Wherever you go, I am going to go. Your people will become my people, and your God will become my God*'. And so the two of them return to Israel together, and the chapter concludes with Naomi changing her name to Mara, which means 'bitter' in Hebrew, and she laments her tragic fate.

Chapter Two begins with Naomi and Ruth discussing where they are going to find food, and it just so happens to be the beginning of the barley harvest. And so Ruth goes out to look for food and it just so happens that she ends up picking grain in

the field of a man named Boaz who just so happens to be Naomi's relative. We are told that Boaz is a man of noble character and he notices Ruth. And so after finding out more about her story, he shows remarkable generosity to her. He makes these special provisions so that the immigrant Ruth can gather grain in his field. And in doing so, Boaz is actually obeying an explicit command of the Torah, to show generosity to the immigrant and the poor. Boaz is so impressed by Ruth's loyalty to Naomi he prays for her that God will reward her for her boldness. So Ruth comes home that day and Naomi finds out that she met Boaz and she is thrilled. She says Boaz is their family redeemer. Now, this family redeemer thing, this was a cultural practice in Israel where if a man in the family died and he left behind a wife or children or land, it was the family redeemer's responsibility to marry that widow, to take up the land and protect that family. So Naomi, she begins to hope that perhaps there might still be a future for her family.

Chapter Three begins with Naomi and Ruth making a plan to get Boaz to notice their situation. So Ruth is going to stop wearing clothes of a grieving widow and she's going to show signs that she's available to be married. And so Ruth goes to meet Boaz on the farm that night and, as she approaches, Boaz wakes up and he's totally startled, and Ruth makes her intentions very clear. She asks if Boaz will redeem Naomi's family and marry her. Boaz is, once again, amazed by Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and her family and he calls Ruth a woman of noble character. It's the same term used to describe the woman of Proverbs 31. So Boaz tells Ruth to wait until the next day and he will redeem both Ruth and Naomi legally before the town elders. And so the chapter ends with Ruth returning to Naomi and they marvel together at all of these recent events.

In Chapter Four, it all comes together. It turns out, at the last minute, Boaz discovers there is a family member who is closer to Naomi than he is and he's actually eligible before him to redeem the family. But at the last second, this family member finds out

that he is going to have to marry Ruth, the Moabite, and so he declines. But Boaz, remember, he knows Ruth's true character and so he acquires the family property of Naomi and he marries Ruth. And so, just as at the beginning how Ruth was loyal to Naomi's family, so now Boaz is loyal to Naomi's family as well. The story concludes with a reversal of all of the tragedies from Chapter One. So the death of the husband and the sons is reversed as Ruth is married again and gives birth to a new son, granting joy to Naomi, and this symmetry between the opening and the closing, it's even more remarkable. So remember, the opening tragedy was followed by a great act of loyalty on the part of Ruth, and that is now matched by Boaz's act of loyalty that leads to the family's final restoration. And this symmetry, it highlights the design of the internal chapters, as well. So each of the chapters begins with Naomi and Ruth making a plan for their future, and that's followed by a providential meeting between Ruth and Boaz, and each chapter concludes with Naomi and Ruth rejoicing at what's taken place.

This story is beautifully designed, and that design actually connects with a really interesting feature of the story and that's how little God is mentioned, right. The characters talk about God a few times, but the narrator actually never once mentions God doing anything directly in the story, and that's its brilliance because God's providence is at work behind every scene of this story weaving together the circumstances and choices of all these characters. So Naomi, her tragedy leads her to think that God is punishing her, but actually the whole story is about God's mission to restore her and her family and He's doing so through Ruth, through her boldness and loyalty which brings healing to Naomi's life but not without Boaz who's a no-nonsense farmer, who's full of generosity and loyalty. And so God uses his integrity combined with Ruth's boldness to save Naomi and her family. And so this story brilliantly explores the interplay of God's purposes and will with human decision and will. God weaves together the faithful obedience of

His people to bring about His redemptive purposes in the world, and that leads to the real end of the story.

The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy showing how Boaz and Ruth's son Obed was the grandfather of King David from whom came the lineage of the Messiah. And so, all of a sudden, these seemingly mundane ordinary events in this story are woven into God's grand story of redemption for the whole world. And so the Book of Ruth invites us to consider how God might be at work in the very ordinary mundane details of our lives, as well. And that's what the Book of Ruth is all about.

[Video ends]

So that gives you a sense of this Book, and as I pondered this, for me there are these four thoughts, these four keys, these four triggers that took place thousands of years ago but, to me, they connect up to me today. And those are simply famine, Moab, the idea of returning and this kinsmen redeemer. How do these connect today? Let's go into this.

Ruth 1:1 or page 121

In the day when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

Now you have to right away ask yourself, why is there a famine in the land? See, God wanted to bless the Israelite nation. He wanted to give them great things. He wanted them to do well. Bethlehem itself means it's a food basket, the crops were to be plentiful and, yet, there's a famine because in the covenant God also warned them 'if you choose not to follow Me, I am going to do many different things. And one of them would be famine to discipline, to get your attention'.

Leviticus 26:20

I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain because your

soil will not yield its crops nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.

This should have not surprised them. Famine is an interesting thing, used in many ways in Scripture. Famine is used, one, to discipline and we kind of see it in this place that God is disciplining them to understand where they have gone astray. Famine is also used actually to move people. We saw that with Joseph and with his Dad Jacob. To get them to Egypt, God uses famine to move them to a place He needs them to be in Egypt. Famine is used to get people's attention, perhaps connected to discipline. Famine is also a path to maturity.

When my friend Saulius Karosas was here a few weeks back from Lithuania, he made this phrase throughout the weekend. He said, 'miracles do not lead to maturity'. I hate that line. I asked him several times 'what do you mean? Don't you want miracles? Like don't you ever pray God if You would just like do this thing, like don't we think that if God did these crazy things here we would all now be super committed followers of Jesus? And yet Saulius has lived through this. See, he was seventeen years old in 1991 when Lithuania got independence from Russia, and he said God moved in an amazing way. He says it was a chaos of miracles. There were miracles everywhere. People were being healed of all kinds of stuff. He was in the middle of it all. He came to faith through that, and it all came crashing down because everybody is looking for the next piece of entertainment, the next miracle, and he looked at me and he said, 'Matt, the only way I've grown in my faith in God is through my pain and through suffering'. He says 'miracles do not lead to maturity'.

We have our own personal famine still, don't we? Relational stress or conflict. Financial hardship. Uncertain future. Maybe a physical sickness. We could make that list grow long. Sometimes I believe these famines God brings upon us. Sometimes we bring them upon ourselves because of our decisions. Sometimes I think other people bring them on us because of their poor decisions and their sinfulness

and we are caught in the crosshairs, but we all enter famine, don't we? And if you aren't in one now, you are going to be heading into one. I don't mean to be a downer, but that's life, isn't it? You know, some people ask me today 'how are you doing Matt?' and I can tell you right now I am doing great, like I am not in famine right now in my life, but I know that tomorrow or next week or three months from now I could enter into a moment where I am going eeeeeee [sound effect]. Right? We've all been there or some of you, you know it. As soon as I say it, you know it. You are in the middle of something right now.

And we can all respond in different ways, can't we? We can deny them. Ever know those people who just deny that anything is actually wrong. Everybody around them knows it but they are just kind of closing their eyes and their ears and no, nothing is wrong. We are all good. We can blame them on others. That's always a good one to do. It's their fault. We can get angry at God. We can run from them, or we can embrace them to learn from them.

One friend of mine described about running from them in an interesting way. He said, 'it's like a sunset, Matt'. He says, 'you look in the beauty of the sunset and you want that light so much. It was such a great day and you chase after the sunset because you want to keep the sun'. He said, 'but the only way you are going to experience light again is', he says, 'to turn from the sunset and run into the dark because there you are going to find the sunrise'. I've been thinking about that as he shared that with me. But we all have these famines. What do we do with them?

Ruth 1:1-2 or page 121

So a man from Bethlehem and Judah together with his wife and two sons went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech. His wife's name was Naomi and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion.

And off they take off. The famine that was there in Bethlehem, God is orchestrating this and they choose to go to Moab. You know, Moab, its origins were suspect from the start. I'm not sure if you know the story of how Moab came to be. Maybe you've heard of a guy named Lot. He was a nephew of Abraham and they had to part ways and so Lot and his wife and his daughters they go to live in this place called Sodom, and God needs to destroy Sodom because there is just mayhem and just nothing good in it. But Lot is warned, so him and his wife and daughters escape and the angel had told them 'don't look back', and you may recall the story. Lot's wife turns and looks back and she is turned into a pillar of salt but Lot and his daughters escape and they go and live in this cave. The daughters get concerned our generation will not carry on. Our name will be blotted out. We need to do something and so on two consecutive nights they get their father drunk and they have sex with him, and it says in,

Genesis 19:36

As a result, both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their own father. When the older daughter gave birth to a son she named him Moab. He became the ancestor of the nation now known as the Moabites.

From the very start, Moab has bad beginnings. Moab they worshipped a god called Chemosh. So here's a little map as to where Elimelech and Naomi and the sons went from Bethlehem, about a ninety kilometer journey around to Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. They run away from famine. Let me show you something more about who Moab is all about.

II Kings 3:26-27

When the king of Moab saw that he was losing the battle, he led 700 of his swordsmen in a desperate attempt to break through the enemy lines near the king of Edom, but they failed. 27Then the king of Moab took his oldest son, who would have

been the next king, and sacrificed him as a burnt offering on the wall.

This is Moab. You know, they found what they are calling the Moabite Stone back in the 1800s and it actually describes a battle between Moab and Israel on the Stone. It's actually at the Louvre in Paris. This took place around 850 BC. This is a real place. This is beyond what Scripture is saying. This is Moab.

So what is Moab? Moab represents distraction. Moab is the place that we go to run away from famine. Moab may provide short-term relief. It may seem like it's a good place to go. When they went to Moab, actually the two sons married two Moabite women. They probably thought 'oh, it's going to work out. Our family is growing. This is all amazing'. And we can create really good reasons to go to Moab. We can justify all kinds of reasons, yet Moab is never the life that God intended for us. It's never what He wanted for them in the first place. Famine was there to teach and they run from famine and go to Moab, the place that worships Chemosh and sacrifices their own children.

Ruth 1:6 or page 121

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

You see, she was there and while she was there, as the story said, her husband dies. Her sons get married and then her sons die, and this whole world is just starting to fall apart.

She left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

As we know from The Story, Orpah decides to stay but Ruth then, interestingly, comes with her, but there's this whole theme, it's so beautiful in Scripture - this whole idea of return, this whole idea of God calling us and us - people - having to choose

will I return or not, and Naomi chooses to return but there's some great pieces about her return. You see, pain is often what brings us back, isn't it? How many times have you been going along and ya, God is kind of there but then you experience pain in life and, all of a sudden, maybe I need God and - God uses pain in Naomi's life. We need to decide if we'll trust God again. Interestingly, Naomi never abandoned the God she grew up with. She never did follow the god Chemosh of the Moabites. She still had that there. I think something about her really intrigued Ruth but she had to figure this thing out again because she ran, in one sense, from Him.

Return requires honesty. It's part of the process and Naomi herself when she comes back - she was gone for ten years - and she returns and her friends see her. 'Naomi, welcome back' and Naomi means pleasant, and Naomi looks at them and she says 'don't call me Naomi anymore. Call me Mara - bitter. My life is bitter'. Interestingly, she wasn't bitter at God. Nowhere in Scripture is she mad at who God is. She's just trying to figure this thing out, though, and she knows that her life has become bitter but it's an honest conversation in front of her.

It's intriguing when people come to us and, you know, they are trying to find God again. There's pain in their lives. You almost can predict who is going to make it and who is not. Those who kind of come and still try to make themselves look okay, they just need a bit of a pat on the back, they are not really being honest with their circumstance. You are not really sure if they are doing the hard work. But those who really lay it out and honestly put their whole life on the line and say 'here it is. Here is what I think I have to own. Here's my life', you can look at them in the face and say 'I think you can make it because you are being honest with where you are and where you need to go'. I think this is part of Naomi's journey. But the amazing thing is, despite all this, God continues to redeem. And that's the beauty of Who God is. He's always in the business of redeeming lives despite the decisions we might make. It's a beautiful story because Ruth

comes with her. Ruth from Moab, the place where they sacrifice their sons. God, in one sense, is redeeming a little part of Moab.

So Ruth returns, in one sense, turns away from what she knew, steps into what she doesn't completely know. Ever been in those places? You know you can't be there anymore, something tells you, but you're turning here and you are going 'I only know one step', yet something about what Naomi had and Ruth steps into this moment. She just recognized there's a better way. There's a better way, and she simply needed to trust Naomi to guide her on this journey.

You see, this return is always done in community. We have to do it together. We need people to walk with us, to journey with us and here she steps into this moment and despite Naomi and all their decisions God is still redeeming.

We go on, as The Story said, Ruth comes and she picks barley and discovers this guy Boaz, and Naomi says the following:

Ruth 2:20 or page 124

The Lord bless him, Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. She added, that man is our close relative. He's one of our guardian redeemers.

And this whole aspect of kinsmen redeemers is such a beautiful part of the story. It was God's design for the Israelites. It ensured that nobody got lost. It ensured that everyone was taken care of. Designed to see the beauty of community, and it was a reminder to them of who God was. God, in His beauty, built into their systems, built into their structures this kinsmen redeemer so no one would ever go wanting, no one would ever lose their land, and every time someone would step in as the kinsmen redeemer and redeem a family so their land would not get lost. Everybody was supposed to take a step back and say 'whoa, this is really beautiful',

and they would be reminded in themselves who God is as He built it into how they were supposed to interact with each other. And it was a foretaste of what was yet to come for us.

You see, Boaz, the kinsmen redeemer, if you look at his life he was a relative, he was a man of standing, he was godly, he was welcoming, he was sensitive, he was generous, he provided for needs. This is a perfect picture of what this redeemer should look like. And then you put him side-by-side with Jesus Christ Himself, our Redeemer. He leaves heaven and becomes our relative, He becomes human. He was the Godman in His humanity. He was the most Godly. He was obedient to God the Father. He welcomed all who came to Him. He was sensitive, engaging with people with grace and mercy. He demonstrated generosity, and He provided for us through His death. What a beautiful picture of a God who was already creating back in the time of Ruth a foretaste of what was yet to come that we can enjoy the beauty of.

So where does this take us? How does this trigger us? If you look at famines, what famine are you perhaps experiencing right now? What is that piece in your life and are you stepping into it or are you running away from it? Are you accepting it or are you just blaming others?

I'm like you. I don't want famine. Alright? I want miracles. Yet, if we are all honest, when have you grown in character the most? When have you stepped into those moments? It's when you've had to go deep and tuck in. What famine are you experiencing now? Maybe you are not, but if you reflect on past famines, what lessons are there still for you to learn because miracles do not lead to maturity, but famines do.

Moab – what's your go-to Moab? Where's the place that you just run to whenever there is stress in life? Could be alcohol. Could be drugs. Could be spending. Let's just shop this one out, right? How about blaming? That's a good one. We just go to the blame game and that helps us get through our stress.

How about moving? Let's pick up and move somewhere else because I don't like this place anyways. How about just change my friends because those ones, you know, they're not really good anyways and I don't want to have the hard conversation. Sex. Pornography. What is your go-to Moab where you run away from maybe what God is trying to do in your life in the midst of famine?

Then there's return. The beauty of the theme of return in Scripture is one of the most amazing themes there is, I think. God calling us 'come on, return to Me. Return to Me'. In what area of your life is God calling you to return, to come back? And what's holding you back from returning from Moab?

And here's the reality of this, I think. Many of you might say 'Well Matt, I am a Christian. I love Jesus. I'm following Him. I'm really embracing Him. I've returned'. Here's what I believe – we all have one, two, five, whatever areas of our life where God is calling us back. Yes, we've accepted who Jesus Christ is, yet there are these areas of life where we have to – maybe your marriage it's rockin', boy, we are doing well here but it's been so long you've even entered it you don't even know you are in Moab anymore. That's why we have our reflection exercises on the App, it's on our web, there's a paper copy at the Welcome kiosk. It has you think through six areas of life that perhaps one of those areas God is saying, you know what, I need you to return. You are sitting over there. Ya, you are doing well, but I need you to return. I think we all have – it's an on-going journey of faith, isn't it? Piece by piece, step by step, God says 'okay, let's bring you back on this one. Let's bring you back now on this one'. It's the beauty of who God is. He doesn't leave us where we are. Piece by piece, through His beauty, He calls us back. He calls us back. And who can come alongside you to show you how God is working beyond what you can even see. We do this together. We do this together because we can't see everything, can we? If you are like me, I can lie to myself; I can make up answers for anything to make

me be able to stay where I want to stay. It's not until I have friends in my life look me in the face and say 'you are wrong. You are wrong'.

Redeemer – anything more amazing than God the Redeemer? How often do you think about the beauty of Jesus being a Redeemer in all things, or how are you trying to redeem yourself and leaving God out of the equation? And what would it look like for you to fully submit your life to Jesus as your Redeemer? What would it look for us? What would it look for your friendships? What would it look like in your neighbourhood? What would it look like in your marriage? If there is a beauty of God's redeemed me, boy, how can I step in alongside somebody else and share the beauty of what I've experienced?

Ruth is an amazing story thousands of years ago, yet I think for me it triggers things for today. My famines – will I step in or will I run? My Moab – am I ready to admit 'man, I run there all the time. I've got to stop running to Moab'. Am I going to return? Will I trust God that this is not right? I don't fully understand this but I will step into it along with others and trust that His way is the way? And can I live in the beauty that I am redeemed because of what Jesus Christ has done for me? That's the life I want to continually call myself into and call us into. What would that look like for us as a community?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the beauty of Ruth. I thank You for how it has just challenged me and moved me. And so, God, I just got to put it out. God, I'm sorry. I confess where I am just running away from what You are calling me into. Running to Moab. I confess the wrongness of that. Lord, I want to enter into the beauty that You have for me, for us. Lord, help us all to embrace the call You have on our lives, to trust what You have for us and enter into it and bring others with us, for the sake of Your Kingdom, for the sake of what You have for us. May this be our reality. Amen. Amen.

Points to Ponder

THE STORY

The Faith of a Foreign Woman

Chapter 9

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What parts of Ruth's story engaged with you the most?
2. Describe a "famine" experience you've had. How did you respond?
3. Where is "Moab" for you? Where do you run to when life gets difficult? What do you need to put in place in your life to keep you from going there and instead to face your "famine" experiences?
4. Is there an area of your life where God is not central or where you need to return to God? It's important to understand that we often segment our lives, following God in some ways but running to Moab in others.
5. Where do you need to see the redemption of God in your life? Do you trust Him in this? Do you need to ask for His forgiveness and allow Him to do a great work in you?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed.